

Negotiating the Principles and Practice of School Leadership: the Kazakhstan Experience

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an account of how school leaders in Kazakhstan learn about leadership and management, and what strategies are in place to support leadership development. The paper draws on empirical data collected over three years, derived mainly from interviews and focus groups with school leaders and teachers. The findings suggest that a hierarchical education system and strict policy regulations diminish the likelihood that the changes needed to encourage leadership practice by teachers will take place. The paper examines Kazakhstani school leaders' learning opportunities, and focuses on the implications of borrowing leadership theories from the West. The key argument is that, if genuine change is to occur, these leaders will require time and space for critical reflection about what it is they need to learn and to do. The paper raises important issues about the conceptualisation of leadership learning and development in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, school reform, leadership learning, Centre of Excellence, professional development

Introduction

In recent years a series of major initiatives have been undertaken in Kazakhstan to reform schools, with the aim of reaching international educational standards. To achieve this aim, Kazakhstan has sought out other countries (e.g. Finland, Singapore, Canada, the UK and USA) to learn best practices. In the face of this educational restructuring, the role of school leaders is becoming increasingly important. The key objectives of the educational agenda in Kazakhstan are elaborated in the State Programme of Education Development (SPED) in the

Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020 (MoES, 2010) and have a significant impact on the practice of school leaders in the country. Among these are: ‘improvement of education *management* including implementation of corporate governance principles’(Objective #4, p.3); and ‘development of public-private partnership systems’ (Objective #5, p.3). Recently published accounts of the early stages of our research (see Bridges 2014; Frost et al. 2014), as well as the latest international and national reports (OECD 2014; World Bank SABER 2014) highlight the importance of enhancing the quality of leadership in Kazakhstani schools and extending the level of autonomy for principals. The OECD report (2014) emphasises that:

“[...] policies in support of school principals are considerably more limited, despite an anticipated increase in responsibilities for principals in connection with the education reform” (p.20).

This paper draws on data from a large international collaborative research project between three institutions: the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education in the UK, Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, and Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) in Kazakhstan. By drawing on selected interviews and focus groups with principals, deputy principals, and teachers, this article explores how school leaders and teachers in Kazakhstan learn about leadership and management, and what strategies are in place to support leadership development.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief description of the educational context and its impact on the role of school leaders in Kazakhstan. The second section reviews selected international literature on leadership development mechanisms in different cultural contexts. The third section explains how data were selected for this article. The fourth section examines school leadership learning opportunities in Kazakhstan. The final section provides a summary of key issues discussed and offers conditional suggestions for policy-makers and practitioners.

Research context

The education system in Kazakhstan was strongly influenced by the Russian and Soviet pedagogical traditions. After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan went

through significant changes in political, social and economic life which brought about shifts in value orientations and educational expectations. Central here was the establishment of a market economy, which was widely seen as having important implications for the education system. However, transition to market economies throughout the former USSR had been particularly challenging for education (DeYoung and Nadirbekyzy 1997).

The educational reforms in the 1990s in Kazakhstan, like those in many post-Soviet and post-socialist countries, could be characterised as a '*post-socialist education reform package*' (Silova and Stener-Khamisi 2008:1). This is a set of policy reforms symbolising the adoption of Western educational values and including such 'travelling policies' as student-centred learning, curriculum standards, decentralisation of educational finance and governance, privatisation of higher education, standardisation of student assessment, liberalization of textbook publishing, and many others' (Silova 2011). During the first phase of education reform the changes were largely structural modifications to secondary schooling, leaving the content of the curriculum and teaching practices largely untouched. In general, this period of education transformation in Kazakhstan could be described as uncoordinated and piecemeal, with policy-makers simultaneously struggling to maintain Soviet traditions, revive pre-Soviet traditions, and re-position the country closer to the West, all at the same time (Yakovets 2012:44). Chapman et al. (2005), in their analysis of strategies employed by governments of five post-Soviet countries (i.e. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), found that the shift in responsibility to school level administrators was not combined with any additional training for school principals 'who were suddenly confronted with responsibilities for which they had little training or experience' (p.523). Furthermore, few training programmes were developed (Chapman et al., 2005). The demand for skills and managerial training and background were unprecedented (Anderson and Heyneman 2005:377)

One of the reasons for this failure to provide training was that under the Soviet Union the nature of the preparation programme for school principals was determined in Moscow and was guided by the principles of Marxist-Leninist ideology, with an emphasis in schools on a Communist upbringing for children who would contribute to the wider societal goals. During the Soviet era educational administrators were appointed by Communist party bodies based on the 'political maturity' and loyalty of candidates. Shamova (1992) has provided a useful account of the requirements of school principal training in the later 1980s in the 'faculties for

the training and upgrading of qualifications, of organisers of public education' (*sic.*) (p.31), and described the following tendency:

‘...an analysis of the practice of managerial activity under conditions of *perestroika* has shown that many experienced administrators are in a very difficult situation, because they are unable to restructure their own thinking, their relationship to the school collective the pedagogical process and its organisation toward a process of democratisation and *glasnost* [openness] in the school’ (Shamova, 1992:31).

She also noted that ‘the school principal must restructure the entire pedagogical process and its management, tasks which require high competence and new knowledge’ (Shamova 1992:31). While this was seen as progressive thinking at that time, the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought a new educational agenda in all newly established countries.

In the 2000s the educational system in Kazakhstan became increasingly diversified through the establishment of academic lyceums, gymnasiums, private schools and networks of elite schools (Yakavets and Dzhadrina 2014). The major networks of schools are: the Republican Research and Practical Centre, otherwise known as ‘Daryn’ network of schools for gifted and talented students (including a number of boarding schools); a network of Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums (KTL); and a network of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) (Yakavets, 2014). These are highly selective schools which provide more in-depth curricula (mainly in mathematics, science and English), are better funded, equipped and have highly qualified teachers. Elite schools are often selected by the Ministry of Education and Science as ‘pilot schools’ to test a new curriculum, or a 12-year schooling model, or tri-lingual education (i.e. teaching in Kazakh, Russian and English). The network of 20 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools plays an important role in the strategic plans of the Government to improve state educational standards through the process of modelling and translating best practice to the wider system. These schools are working with leading international educational partners in the UK, US, Finland, the Netherlands, Singapore and some other countriesⁱ.

There is a considerable number of schools called ‘*ungraded*’ⁱⁱⁱ (Rus. *malokomplektnaya shkola*) located in small towns and villages (Kaz. *auls*). Often these schools represent mixed forms, have insufficient teachers, poor equipment and limited financial resources. Overall,

the variety of schools presents both opportunities and challenges to school leaders, and consequently more exacting requirements for their preparation and development.

Our earlier research has revealed three distinct categories of leadership practices across different types of schools participating in the research project. The first group is relatively small and is comprised of principals and deputies within the network of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools which are mainly located in major cities across the country. The major task for this group of leaders is learning in the changing context, namely:

- understanding the key features of, and implementing, a new curriculum developed in partnership with Cambridge International Examinations
- developing and promoting new practices of teaching; (e.g. team teaching with international teachers; teaching mathematics and science in English)
- implementing criteria-based assessment
- developing a new collaborative culture in their schools
- collaborative working with international staff employed in schools
- the ‘translation’ of best experience and practices to school partners selected by the Ministry of Education and Science.

The role of the international staff is central in introducing Western theories, ideas and practices into the daily life of NIS. In general, participants from NIS were more vocal in sharing their experience of learning about leadership, and in their interpretations of the distributed leadership practices they were aiming to implement and develop in their schools.

The second group of school principals and practices observed were in partner schools of NIS located mainly in large cities. These schools were selected by the Ministry of Education and Science as the ‘best prepared’ for translating NIS experience. There are a number of challenges this group of principals have to deal with, namely:

- staff and students turnover: the best teachers and students leaving to NIS
- the pressure to implement in their own schools best practice learned from NIS
- to ‘translate’ their NIS experience and best practice to other local schools.

The third group of school principals are from all types of mainstream schools. The major challenge for principals from this group is an understanding of the reform agenda and their own role in addressing it. In particular, the question is how to assist teachers who attend professional development courses to implement new ways of teaching in their schools? While some principals showed interest and a desire to learn and support new ideas, others preferred to rely on the old traditional ways of working.

Our account has shown that the educational environment is changing rapidly in Kazakhstan. Many innovations have been introduced but there is still much to do in a short time. Principals who started 5-10 years ago are working in a different context these days. The best way to help them adjust to a new agenda and to new roles is through relevant professional development opportunities. Thus, this paper explores how school leaders and teachers learn about leadership in Kazakhstan.

International evidence of leadership learning and development

Interest in leadership learning and development programmes is presently an international phenomenon (Lumby et al. 2009; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009, 2008; Bush, 2008, 2013; Bubb and Earley, 2009; Brundrett and Crawford, 2008; Pegg, 2007; Walker and Dimmock, 2006; Brundrett and Dering, 2006; Bush and Jackson, 2002). Lumby et al. (2009:161/2) claim that ‘an international perspective is not about knowing education overseas, a scientific typology of the alien, but about leaders reaching a deeper understanding of their own acculturation and resulting practice’. They argue that ‘it is essential not only directly to develop leaders and managers, but also to model for learners openness to a wider range of ways of knowing, reflecting and acting’ (Lumby 2009:162). The research of eight selected education systems by McKinsey & Co (Barber, Whelan, and Clark, 2010:5), shows agreement between officials in each of the systems, that school leadership is crucial to outcomes. Furthermore, policy-makers regard the improvement of leadership capacity as a top priority. Indeed, there is a growing realisation that principalship is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation. Bush (2008; 2010) notes the following reasons for this paradigm shift:

- The expansion of the role of school principal; in decentralised systems, the scope of leadership has increased.
- The increasing complexity of school contexts; principals have to engage with their communities in order to lead and manage effectively.
- Recognition that preparation is a moral obligation; it is unfair to appoint new principals without effective induction.
- Recognition that effective preparation and development make a difference; principals are better leaders following specific training.

Various studies in Anglophone countries, in Singapore, Hong Kong and many others (e.g. Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009, 2008; Lumby et al. 2009; Bush, 2008; Huber, 2013; 2004; Walker and Dimmock, 2006), are exploring such questions as: ‘What preparation is required to develop appropriate leadership behaviours? What is the impact of different kinds of leadership preparation?’. The insights derived from those studies present a broad range of meanings for the term ‘leadership preparation’, significant variation in the provision across countries, the degree to which it is mandatory for leaders to be trained, and the ways in which governments, schools and in-service institutions and other actors contribute to leadership development policy and practice. As Bolam (2004) claims:

Models of preparatory training, certification, selection, assessment, induction and ongoing development for school leaders are necessarily rooted in specific national conditions and contexts. They are the product of unique, and dynamically changing, sets of circumstances – political, economic, social, cultural, historical, professional and technical – on that country (p.251).

Different national approaches to leadership preparation and development can be presented as a ‘leadership continuum’, as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1 Leadership continuum



Source: *The figure is based on analysis of the McKinsey & Co (Barber et al. 2010) report.*

In many countries, school leaders begin their professional careers as teachers and progress to principalship via a range of leadership tasks and roles, often described as ‘middle management’ (Bush, 2013:455). In some countries school leaders can be nominated for a leadership position by a hierarchical authority or local authority (Azerbaijan, Belarus, and China) (Lumby et al. 2009:179; Magno 2013).

The report by McKinsey and Co (Barber et al., 2010) suggests that Australia has historically relied on the apprenticeship model in which teachers must gain the necessary skills and experience on the job if they aspire to move through the ranks to principalship. Similarly, Cypriot principals learn their role through an informal apprenticeship as teachers by watching their supervisors at work. However, formalised leadership development has become an emerging trend. In Sweden, a national principal training programme was organised to ensure that school leaders have the competence to lead educational activities, while ensuring that pupils’ and parents’ rights are respected. At the other end of the continuum are England and the USA. In England the National Professional Qualification for Headship includes a personalised learning programme based on individual development needs. The duration of the programme is 4 to 12 months, depending on the applicant. Similarly, a Principal Qualification Programme in Ontario provides 120 hours of theoretical training and 60 hours of practical experience for school heads (Barber et al., 2010).

Western literature highlights self-awareness and self-learning as an essential way to improve leadership practice (e.g. Eraut, 2000; Goleman, 2002; Kotter, 1996). For example, Kotter (1996), claims that leadership learning is sustained through the development of five mental habits: (i) risk taking, or willingness to push oneself outside of one's comfort zone; (ii) humble self-reflection, or an honest assessment of success and failure; (iii) socialisation of opinions, or the active collection of information and ideas from others; (iv) a propensity to listen to others and (v) openness to new ideas – a willingness to view life with an open mind (p.183).

The research evidence from international comparative studies (Huber, 2004; Hallinger, 2003; Bolam, 2003, 2004; Walker and Dimmock, 2006) emphasised the importance of relating learning opportunities to school context. Walker and Dimmock (2006:126) suggest that 'leadership learning' is conceptualised as the processes, contexts and mechanisms within particular courses or programmes which target how school leaders best learn. Our research on school leadership in Kazakhstan also shows that the way Kazakhstani school principals respond to the demands of educational reform depends on variations in the school context (see Yakavets et al., 2015). Furthermore, Glatter (1991:226) suggests that school leadership development policies "must be closely related to the actual work and functioning of the school;...need to extend over a considerable period of time; [that] preparation and follow-up are crucially important; [that] they should foster a "team development" approach and make considerable use of experience-based methods, rather than simply relying on formal "courses". Opportunities for reflection, problem-based learning and case studies; and application of learning in collaboration with colleagues, are among some of the key features of effective leadership development programmes (e.g. Weindling 2004; Glatter 1991).

Studies of leadership preparation in developing countries are challenging in part because there are often significant regional and local differences that make broad generalisation difficult (Lumby et al. 2009:176). At the same time, evidence about leadership development and preparation in non-Western contexts and particularly in post-socialist and post-Soviet countries, is limited. This paper aims to redress this gap by providing insights into practice of school leaders in Kazakhstan.

Research methods

This paper presents data collected over three years of a collaborative research project between the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, the Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, and the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools. We conducted an exploratory study in 2012 (including two field trips, each lasting one week), and interviewed principals from elite schools – Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and the Kazakh Turkish Lyceum. Furthermore, a survey-workshop was organised in October 2012 for 12 principals from mainstream schools in the capital, Astana. The workshop revealed the views and experiences of school principals through structured discussion activities, together with a whole-group discussion. We digitally recorded discussions of principals' group work. In 2013 we conducted six case studies in schools, local educational authorities and in-service teacher education institutions in three different geographical locations in Kazakhstan. We collected data during two field trips, employing a mixed methods research design. The main modes of inquiry included: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, surveys and documentary analysis. Our research in 2014 was extended to three new locations. The sample included schools for gifted and talented children, mainstream schools, and small ungraded schools operating in different geographical and social settings in Kazakhstan. Participants in this study were: school principals, deputies, and teachers (both local and international); 10th and 11th grade students in schools; and officials in the local educational department. Interviews were conducted by two or three researchers in the language which participants preferred to speak: Kazakh or Russian (with some interviews conducted in English).

This paper draws on selected data from interviews and focus groups with 38 school principals (26 female and 12 male); and 20 interviews with school deputies, teachers; with the director and a vice director from the in-service institute; interviews with international team leaders and teachers working in NIS. The majority of participants were female. The experience of school principals varied from those who had been in post for more than 23 years, to those who had been recently appointed. For five principals it was the first principalship in their professional career (see Table 1).

Table 1 Basic information of principals participating in interviews and focus group over the 3 years period

N	Gender	Age range	School type and location	Years of service as principal
1	F	51-55	Daryn selected/a partner of NIS/urban	More than 16 years
2	F	46-50	Ungraded/ rural	10 years
3	M	25-30	Nazarbayev Intellectual School (NIS)/ urban	Less than 1 year
4	F	51-55	Gymnasium / urban	10 years
5	F	46-50	Lyceum / a partner of NIS / urban	7 years/ worked as deputy
6	F	55	Mainstream / rural	12 years
7	M	57	Mainstream / urban	7 years
8	M	66	Mainstream / large semi-rural	12 year /worked as deputy
9	F	46	Lyceum / urban	2 years /worked as deputy
10	M	56-60	Daryn selected /a partner of NIS / urban	11 years
11	F	51-55	Daryn selected / a partner of NIS/ urban	5 years or more
12	F	56-60	Mainstream-gymnasium / semi-urban	23 years
13	F	41-45	Gymnasium / a partner of NIS / urban	Less than 1 year
14	F	50-55	Mainstream / rural school	10 years or more
15	M	25-30	NIS /selected / urban	Less than 1 year
16	M	56-60	NIS /selected / urban	Less than 1 year
17	F	56-60	Mainstream / a partner of NIS / urban	More than 15 years
18	M	51	NIS /selected / urban	Less than 1 year/worked as a deputy
19	F	46-50	Large mainstream / urban	Less than 2 years/ worked as a deputy
20	M	62	Ungraded / rural	12 years or more
21	F	56-60	Daryn selected / large/ urban	11 years or more
22	M	58	NIS /selected / urban	More than 15 years
23	M	25-30	NIS /selected / urban	Less than 1 year
24	M	25-30	Kazakh Turkish Lyceum / selected/urban	Less than 3 years
25	F	56-60	NIS /selected / urban	More than 15 years
26	M	56-60	Mainstream / urban	More than 15 years
27	F	55-60	Mainstream / urban	Over 20 years
28	F	25-30	Mainstream / urban	Less than 2 years
29	F	31-35	Mainstream / urban	Less than 3 years
30	F	31-35	Mainstream / urban	Less than 5 years
31	F	36-40	Mainstream / urban	10 years
32	F	36-40	Mainstream / urban	7 years
33	F	41-45	Mainstream / urban	11-15 years
34	F	41-45	Mainstream / urban	10 years
35	F	46-50	Mainstream / urban	16-20 years
36	F	51-55	Mainstream / urban	16-20 years
37	F	51-55	Mainstream / urban	Over 20 years
38	F	51-55	Daryn selected / urban	Over 20 years

Participants were coded by their job title, Roman numbers were used for locations (I-VII), and the capital letters ‘S’ for schools, and ‘LG’ for local department of education. Selected transcripts were re-coded in NVivo 10 with the focus on answering two research questions:

- How do school leaders and teachers learn about leadership?
- What strategies are in place to support leadership development?

A selection of normative documents provided some background information about school autonomy; the role and responsibilities of school leaders, and formal requirements for professional attestation and upgrading of teachers. Information on web pages of organisations which provide formal professional development courses across the country was analysed. The paper has adopted an interpretive perspective, designed to understand the experience of research participants and to develop theory that is ‘grounded’ in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Analysis of data

Entering principalship

The Ministry of Education and Science aims to attract the best candidates to leadership posts and eliminate local ‘bad practice’. For this purpose, the selection procedure for school leaders has been changed and is currently conducted on a competitive basis (MoES, 2012). The key requirements are:

- higher pedagogical education
- not less than 5 years’ experience working in an educational organisation
- the first or highest teaching qualification
- not less than 3 years’ experience in administrative work
- a supporting recommendation from the regional Department of Education
- no criminal record.

The competition is held by a local educational authority (e.g. oblast/region, city and rayon/district levels) to which a school is accountable. With the purpose of providing transparency, objectivity and equal opportunities for all shortlisted candidates, the local educational authority forms a selection committee of not less than five people. The committee usually includes representatives of the local educational authority, trade union, teachers and parents. The information about new vacancies has to be published in the mass media and also

on the official web site of the educational authority (MoES 2012). Shortlisted candidates are informed and have to go through two stages of competition: i) qualification assessment (to meet the key requirements listed above); and ii) an interview with the selection committee. During the interview short-listed candidates are ‘tested’ *via* oral questions from the interview panel for their knowledge of education law, legislation on child psychology, interpersonal skills, personnel management, business ethics and so on. Also considered are pedagogical achievements, awards and certificates, personal qualities, organisational skills and knowledge of the Kazakh language. To make principals more accountable, the tenure of the post is restricted to five years, with re-appointment on a competitive basis.

Our data show that all principals have unique career histories, years of principalship and individual attitudes towards their roles and leadership styles. The majority of school principals (*Rus.* Director) we interviewed started their professional career as teachers, and progressed via various leadership roles – more often through being deputy principal for some time.

I started as a teacher and have worked as a director for the last 10 years. I’ve been working at this gymnasium for only two years. This is a new experience. I specifically did not intend to accept this [position]. It is very difficult and responsible work. I do understand the very heavy responsibility placed upon my shoulders. I shall further promote my school, and I try my best (Principal-F-i-S-E)

There were examples in our data of fairly quick promotion to a senior position:

In 2008, I graduated from [University], with a degree in Mathematics. Immediately after the graduation, in July 2008, I jointed [a headquarter of selected schools]. I started as a manager. First I was responsible for information technologies, later for the supply of equipment to the schools, then for the educational process itself. In 2011, I was appointed as a school director. (Principal-M-iv-S-A2)

While principals’ experiences varied, some believed that ‘to know where to go, one must experience the whole thing at first hand, feel it thoroughly and only then take on responsibility for the whole staff’ (Principal-F-v-S-B). Similarly, another participant describing his path to principalship commented:

Right now, for example, if we have some issues with teachers, I understand them. I understand the pressure of the system on them, how much paper work they should do (Principal-M-v-S-E)

Not all school leaders had planned to take on leadership roles. In a hierarchical society like Kazakhstan, people often used to be given ‘orders’ which they had to obey. There were some examples of ‘directed’ appointments. One study participant, who had been working as the principal for more than 24 years, commented:

I did not have any ambitions in working at the school... I was appointed the Head of [*rayon*] Educational Department (local department of education). In 1990 I was appointed the head of this school... Frankly speaking, I wasn’t even asked whether I wanted it or not (Principal-F-v-S-B)

Three principals we spoke had started during the Soviet time working as young communist activists (e.g. a secretary of Komsomol organisation in an University; then were responsible for running an ideological work at a local department of education; a deputy head of local educational authority and then a school principal). As one Principal noted, her ‘party’ experience helped to be proactive and developed organisational and communicational skills, and in being appointed first as deputy principal, and then promoted to a principal’s post.

Strong academic knowledge of science along with genuine enthusiasm about various scientific competitions and Olympiads were seen as crucial in the appointment of this Principal:

I have never worked as a teacher, never as a deputy principal. I have a PhD in science. I worked at [...] Institute, plus work with students, with Olympiad participants... In 2003 I was appointed as Director of this school (Principal-M-iv-S-A)

The data highlighted that in some schools an acting principal often selects the most able and proactive teachers, possessing good leadership potential, and provides them with mentoring and support. In some ways this is nurturing future school leaders:

This is the only school which has a 135-year-long history... I am the 7th principal in this school, and all the principals were appointed upon the recommendation of the principal who was retiring. I was appointed by the Oblast Akim (i.e. local authority)... It was on a

competitive basis. I passed the competition and took the post in October 2013 (Principal-F-v-S-C)

One rural school we visited in 2013, and again in 2014, have had only five men as principals since its establishment in the 1940s. The current principal, who was appointed in 2001, had spent 30 years previously in the school as first a mathematics teacher and then deputy principal making 42 years overall. There were three women deputies and there was appeared to be a ‘successor’, who had been sent on the Centre of Excellence (CoE)ⁱⁱⁱ Three Levels training, and generally being mentored by the current principal:

I think it helps [if the principal is a man]. For example, there is a teacher who came here by means of the ‘Diploma to the village’ programme. He is a good teacher. He gives his knowledge to students and shares ideas with teachers...We need more male teachers (Vice-Principal-F-ii-S-D).

A majority of principals, deputies and teachers were predominantly women with a few men^{iv}. The overall perception is that the teaching profession is less attractive to men because ‘men should earn more as they should support the family’ (Vice-Principal-F-ii-S-D). Thus, those men who were in schools were highly valued and often promoted quickly to a senior post. In short, the process by which principals succeed to the position could be seen as an important characteristic of school stability and a strong organisational culture.

Formal opportunities to learn

Formal professional courses about leadership and management run by the National Centre for Professional Development - ‘Orleu’^v. It offers different categories of training programmes, so that teachers and school leaders can choose in accordance with their needs and qualifications. Training modules are oriented to both early career and experienced staff. A training programme for principals includes the theory and methodology of school management; psychological and methodological modules; conflict resolution; a type of ‘general’ module introducing educational reforms taking place in the country; legislation; policy documents; and effective ways of preparing a school portfolio. One recently appointed principal shared her experience:

I completed a deputy principal course, and a principal course in 2012 – a ‘*Leadership and Management*’ course at Orleu. There was a two-week course. We studied Bloom's taxonomy. It was about what we should put an emphasis on as leaders, the nature and ethics of leadership, etc.

(Principal-F-v-S-C)

The data reveal that there is no formal qualification for principals in Kazakhstan and there is no ‘induction’ programme when a new person is appointed.

Another professional development opportunity for school leaders and teachers is provided by Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education (NU GSE). Since 2013, NU GSE is offering an MSc in Educational Leadership (one-year or two-year programme) and a PhD in Education. However, all courses are taught in English and one of key requirements is IELTS 6.5 or equivalent^{vi}. As participants in our focus group commented, this language requirement is a barrier in applying for the programme.

There are two other contexts in which school leaders and teachers’ professional learning occurs. The first is within the context of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools – where local and international practitioners are working together. The second is professional development and the dissemination of leadership ideas across the country through the Centre of Excellence programme. The programme provides an innovative understanding of ‘leadership’ in schools:

“Collaboration is at the heart of teacher leadership, as it is premised upon change that is enacted collectively. Teacher leadership is premised upon a power re-distribution within the school, moving from hierarchical control to peer control. [...] This view of leadership therefore is not hierarchical, but federal”. (CoE, 2012:208/9)

More specifically, it is a view of leadership that ‘is both tight and loose; tight on values, but loose on the freedom to act, opportunity to experiment and authority to question historical assumptions’ (CoE 2012, 209). Furthermore since 2013 a new programme for school leadership has been developed by NIS Centre of Excellence and the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge (see Sharimova 2014). The programme focuses on the issues relating to leadership teaching and learning, developing self and others, instructional leadership, strategic planning, leading improvement, innovation and change, and working collaboratively with colleagues, parents and the wider community. The leadership

programme is delivered by means of two face-to-face training courses (each lasting two weeks) and two school-based practical phases. The programme runs over six months.

The majority of school leaders saw professional development as an important aspect of their role. Therefore, principals frequently attend courses and seminars and see it as a major responsibility to disseminate the new ideas they have learned to the staff:

To teach others, primarily, you must learn yourself; to develop others you must develop constantly. (Principal-F-iii-S-B)

While overall opinions about various formal training opportunities were positive, some participants felt that they deserved a different type of training to that offered.

Once I was in Astana when the principals of all the specialised schools were gathered together, and they asked us to sit in a circle and come up with a name you associate... like, moon, or something.. It was some kind of game... so I left. I did not like that kind of game. I just do not understand this too well. (Principal-M-iv-S-A)

This example supports Bush's (2013) argument about 'personalised learning' for school leaders, that 'school leaders are adults, and are senior professionals who expect to be involved in determining their own leadership learning' (p. 456).

Overall, the data suggest that formal opportunities to learn tend to focus on pedagogical, psychological and normative (or legislative) support of principals' professional knowledge and development. At the same time new programmes have been developed with an aim to provide modern approaches to leadership learning and development.

On-job opportunities to learn

Some new opportunities have been developed as a result of the dissemination of experience and good practice from NIS to their partner-schools. School leaders as well as teachers were able to attend workshops or open lessons, or spend a few days shadowing, for example, a principal:

[...] we work closely with 35 (partner) schools. They [school leaders] have already been everywhere, they went on job shadowing, many of them have been in NIS schools, and they have attended all of the conferences, all the seminars...we don't hold anything without them. We always send notices about [...] schools meetings, everything (Senior-Official-F-vi-Org-A)

The results highlight a very positive reaction by teachers, principals and students to the Centres of Excellence professional development programme. However, while all participants were content with teachers attending professional courses, there were some critical comments:

...we sent the teachers on these courses, while the principals and deputy-principals remained untrained. And when they came back, it was hard for us. They knew inside that neither I nor the principal knew anything... So, I immediately took their textbooks and read them; I asked them questions and attended their lessons' (Deputy-Principal-F-i-S-A)

This comment reflects the issue discussed above, that in a hierarchical society status and seniority are sensitive matters which influence the process of learning in both positive and negative ways. Some participants saw this as an opportunity and motivation for self-development and self-awareness:

...we have already got 15 teachers who have passed the [CoE] training; the school has led coaching sessions; and I am ashamed to fall behind the times, working as the school principal and not knowing what's happening in the world, So I learn about it by either self-education methods or at seminars... also I talk to teachers who passed the second level courses (Principal-F-i-S-E)

Participants noted that they worked hard, put a lot of effort into learning 'how to be a leader', and went through a long and demanding journey:

When we are talking about the leaders, we can't deny their natural qualities such as whether someone has organisational skills, you could say one is born with them...I can't say that I was born a leader, because I was very shy, lonely as a child, I couldn't openly express my opinion, but I read a lot. I was inspired by famous Russian people [writers], worked on myself, I would say I learned how to be a leader, that is if I am one. (Principal-F-ii-S-C)

The data reveal that in some schools, leaders saw the importance of a wider dissemination of teachers' knowledge and skills, and to some extent encouraged teacher leadership. We had a strong sense of the learning potential in school principals' interactions with members of their leadership teams, and one principal described his situation as 'being lucky, as some of the deputies studied abroad'.

Learning from international experience and exploring leadership theories

Short-term overseas studies, exchanges and visits were mentioned by participants as the channels for school leaders' exposure to the 'Western world', its teaching approaches and leadership theories and practices^{vii}. The indirect impact through e.g. the Internet, reading translated Western works, or Kazakh and Russian books that introduce Western concepts and theories – was described among learning methods.

Since 2012 AEO's NIS has been organising an international annual conference in Astana on topics related to the secondary education curriculum, school leadership, professional development of teachers, and educational policy, practice and research^{viii}. These events attract the interest of policy makers, higher education institutions, school leaders and educators, NGOs in Kazakhstan, as well as international educational organisations and international speakers from around the world. Recent opportunities have inevitably created a different level of experience and leadership discourse across the country:

[...] distributed leadership was the topic of seminars and workshops, and people were absorbing it and absorbing it. Eventually, it begins to kick in.... we haven't really done it, so we do not know what it is, but we will get there [...] I think that distributed leadership here is much more limited. I think that one of the issues here is that the system itself is directed downwards (International-Staff-M-vi-S-A)

The notion that '*leadership is distributed*' is mentioned often in interviews with participants from NIS and partner schools. It was stated that 'distributed leadership is fashionable with us'. When participants were asked to give some examples of how 'distributed leadership' has changed the traditional practices in their schools, the following responses were given:

Distributed leadership is: if I leave the school, my deputies should not notice my absence. All of them know their responsibilities. In planning distributed leadership, each leader is in their place. In my team there are seven people and they can replace each other. ... One of them can be a leader next time. This means that each person can feel her/himself as a leader. (Principal-F-vi-S-B)

In another school distributed leadership was described as ‘a pyramid of authority’ where:

...the director [principal] distributes authority to us, and we distribute authority further along the line. [...] The work has the character of collaboration and mutual enrichment. I truly listen to what they say and they listen to what I say. We have a reciprocal process. We decide together. (Deputy-Principal-F-v-S-A)

One of participants, when recalling his experience of learning about distributed leadership during a two-and-a-half week study visit to the US, stated the importance of trust. As a result, the principal has applied that learning experience of trust-building in his own school. The principal introduced a ‘staff rotation’ which allows each teacher to practice the role of head of subject department, and to understand how ‘the system works’. The important message, according to the principal, is that:

...the question is not to carry all responsibility and work by yourself because you will not have enough strength, either physical or moral. (Principal-M-vii-S-A)

Another participant stated that exposure to the ‘Western experience’ had a positive impact on the principal in their school, who became more supportive of new ideas and initiatives:

...her eyes opened to the world, and the world opened up to her. She supports every initiative now: “*go ahead – do it*”. So, in this regard, our every teacher knows that any initiative that is beneficial for the school, for the kids, for teachers, will always be supported in all respects – in spirit, and financially. We work this way. (Deputy-Principal-F-v-S-A)

Nearly all participants sounded very inspired and motivated by their short-term experience of study abroad, and often reflected on how things were done ‘over there’ compared to their own situation. While some were enthusiastic and inspired to find ways to improve practices in their schools, others referred to differences in contexts and importantly to the funding available.

Recently I have been to Turkey, I saw how they already do what we are required to do here, but they do it differently. So now I think of how to implement these differences here. It's impossible to lead people with strict requirements and constant control these days. (Principal-F-ii-S-C)

There is a common practice of knowledge transfer when on their return people organise a seminar or workshop where they share their learning experiences. However, the geographical context of Kazakhstan limits opportunities for teachers and principals in small rural schools far away from big cities and the capital to attend the latest professional development courses and seminars. The principal from one rural school commented, for example: 'we live on the periphery. It is difficult for us to get out there, we stew in our own juice here' (Principal-F-ii-S-A).

In sum, the results highlight both opportunities and challenges for Kazakhstani school leaders and teachers in leadership learning and development. The opportunities to learn through professional development courses, seminars, workshops and study abroad tours are significant factors. However, some questions could be asked: How useful are these events? How much do people change their practices after they return to a daily routine with endless reporting and a constant lack of time for critical reflection and learning from their mistakes? How should the best practices be developed through collaborative work with international staff? To what extent can new approaches be sustained? As a member of international staff claimed:

[...] if you want to have true change you need time for reflection, you need time for people to think about what it is they are doing to actually learn... I hear often a response: '*Ah, yes, but this is Kazakhstan – we have no time!*' (International-staff-M-vii-S-A).

Discussion and conclusions

This paper examines how school leaders and teachers learn about leadership, and what strategies are in place to support leadership development in Kazakhstan. The results presented above will be connected to the broader literature and discussed next.

Empirical evidence collected over a three year period in Kazakhstan suggests that the majority of school leaders were identified by former principals, and gained the necessary leadership skills and experience through the informal or apprenticeship model. As it was

admitted by some participants, not many were keen to take on principalship, and some even experienced a ‘directed appointment’. Our analysis suggests that Kazakhstani principals are working in a culture that could be referred to in Hofstede’s (1980) terms as having high power distance, collectivist and uncertainty-avoidance characteristics. Overall, within the organisational context, power distance has an impact on subordinates’ expectations and preferences (people want and expect more guidance in societies with more power distance) as well as on what are taken to be acceptable, and which are typical, patterns of leadership behaviour (autocratic leadership is more acceptable and effective in high power distance societies). Furthermore, the findings suggest that a hierarchical education system and strict policy regulations diminish the likelihood that the changes needed to encourage leadership practice by teachers will take place. In this context it is a challenge for teachers to change their perspective on leadership, and they are often reluctant to take on new functions. Within the context of a high power distance culture, people are used to hearing orders: “*Do this*”. Therefore, the challenge for some long-serving teachers with ingrained habits of acquiescence is to begin to use their initiative. It needs to be recognised that:

[...] not all of our teachers understand what leadership is because of their background. As a rule, we have only one leader in school – the principal (Principal-M-iv-S-E).

Participants argued that ‘leadership is a quality that is not for everyone’. This suggests that people need support to learn how to take a lead in initiatives. This can be achieved through a *dialogic infrastructure*, or in other words a ‘set of structures and processes which provide [...] opportunities to engage in professional discourse [...] of sharing practice and discussing key issues in the practice of leadership’ (Frost et al., 2014:235; Yakavets et al. 2015).

The results show that the majority of school principals did not participate in the necessary induction programmes before advancing into school administration. Some school leaders were able to attend short-term courses at in-service institute Orleu and receive some background preparation for the role, and/or were mentored by former heads. Of interest here is Eraut’s (2000) argument that leaders aspire to ‘a maturity of judgement’ – and that this results from meaningful learning. Furthermore, leadership maturity involves the ability to reflect upon issues in order to explore how others might perceive them and how they might impact the future (Eraut 2000). For example, in our research a newly appointed principal started in September with the aim to give freedom to everybody, but at the end of term he

saw that the effect was terrible. The lesson was that '*not all teachers are ready*' to take on leadership. This is in line with Dimmock's (2000) argument that leaders learn from insights which emerge and accumulate through simultaneously applying intuition and collecting and analysing knowledge and evidence in specific leadership situations.

There was a shared view among the majority of participants that school principals, their deputies, as well as teachers, need more leadership training. The most valuable is 'on-the-job' learning, working in a setting where, together with colleagues, people have opportunities for reflective learning (Glatter 1991) and the application of learning in collaboration with colleagues.

Putting people on the plane and sending them to a [Western] University... is not the same thing. The most significant learning that takes place is when you are seeing that it is happening on the ground, or you are obviously doing it on the ground. But if it is in abstract, i.e. removed from being in a school environment, then the learning is much harder. CPD: the more practical it is the better. (International-Staff-M-vi-S-A)

Huber (2004) argues that effective programmes focus on long-term skills development, not just on-the-job training, and actively involve participants through stressing the central role of collaboration (so that collaborative learning networks can contribute beyond the bounds of the programme).

Our account also suggests that school leaders who received Western training (including short-term courses run in Kazakhstan), were encouraging more teachers' leadership within their schools, by 'assigning roles and not controlling every single detail' (or micro-managing), and by introducing the rotation of staff every two years. On the other hand, teachers who attended the Centre of Excellence Levels programme were often more proactive and were frequently described as 'leaders' within the schools. The data usefully show that some school leaders utilised the enriched intellectual capital of their teachers in the development of what they termed 'horizontal structures', which enables teachers who have completed CoE programme to be responsible for the improvement of teaching. In other words, it is turning teachers' intellectual capital into organisational capital.

Based on this analysis, it is possible to argue that on-the-job interactions among staff may be a potential area for leadership learning and development. Many school leaders, especially those who attended training themselves and have developed their own understanding of why changing practice is needed and timely, were encouraging knowledge sharing between the staff. A number of in-house activities, such as half-day seminars and learning conversations, were organised; these forced people to re-examine their current practice and discuss what could be changed, and how. However, changing practice is complex in that it involves not only alternative curriculum specifications, but also the development of new skills, different mindsets, and professional values. This could be the most difficult task with which school leaders as well as policy-makers need to deal. Thus, the current system needs to be revised so that collaboration, sharing and reflection are rewarded.

A major finding of our studies is that school leaders in Kazakhstan are increasingly exposed to ideas, theories, and events beyond the national borders, which could shape their understanding and practice of leadership and management. Overall, our account shows some attempts at integrating Western thoughts with traditional practices. However, for practitioners it is not only difficult to know ‘how does it work’, but the challenge is that ‘the system itself is directed downwards’. Within a society of high power distance culture, people are used to following orders and often afraid of making mistakes:

Currently it is like, if you make a mistake you’ll be shot. That has to stop. So, the leadership have to say: “Ok, for this year how many mistakes did you make?” The more mistakes the better. This is sort of a silly response. But you need to actually say to people: “Do this, make a mistake but learn from it!” (International-Staff-M-S-A-vii)

This situation limits opportunities for leadership learning and distributing leadership in Kazakhstani schools. It will not be possible to achieve a wider distribution of leadership without schools having greater autonomy to redesign themselves as organisation (Yakavets et al. 2015). Our results suggest an urgent need to provide support for aspiring and practising leaders’ through mentoring and/or coaching. The issue of developing individualised leadership development programmes needs to be considered further.

The evidence from international practice shows that professional development is a key process within the wider agenda of raising standards, improving the life chances of children,

and stimulating improvement in many areas of society, not least education. But professional development involves changes to professionalism. The challenge for policy-makers and practitioners in Kazakhstan is how to translate required (or imposed) professionalism into enacted professionalism, so initiating a new collegial professionalism. It can be argued, if genuine change is to occur, school leaders will require time and space for critical reflection about what it is they need to learn and to do.

This paper contributes to the literature on leadership learning and development in non-Western contexts, and in the process raises many questions. Among these, the fact that the majority of school principals were female could be an interesting issue to explore further. For example, were women principals more, or less, interested in Western ideas and in career development? What distinctive challenges do they experience in a hierarchical system of the kind found in Kazakhstan? More generally, there is the issue of the relationship between applying selected Western leadership patterns and developing local, for example specifically Kazakh, leadership narratives and theories. This may be of interest for further research in the field of comparative education as well as in that of educational leadership and management.

Acknowledgements

The research arises out of a partnership between the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, under the auspices of a grant from the Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Kazakhstan. I am very grateful to my colleagues in the research team who participated in this project for their assistance and support.

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ⁱ <http://nis.edu.kz/en/about/partners/>

ⁱⁱ A multigraded (generally translated as 'ungraded' in official documents) school is a comprehensive secondary school with a small number of students, combined class-sets, and a specific form of organisation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Centres of Excellence (CoE) is a large-scale professional development programme for schoolteachers in Kazakhstan which has been developed in cooperation between the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) and with Autonomous Educational Organisation Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (AEO NIS). The primary aim of the CoE was to equip teachers to educate citizens of the 21st century, i.e. to help pupils become independent self-motivated, engaged, confident, digitally competent, responsible and critically reflective learners, able to communicate in Kazakh, Russian and English

(Turner et al., 2014, p.83). A cascade model of professional development was adopted for the CoE programme in order to reach as many teachers as possible (ibid., p.84). The content of the programme delivered through three levels. At the Level 3 the focus is on teachers change in the classroom; at the Level 2 – to support the professional development of other teachers-colleagues through coaching and mentoring; the Level 1 – is about bringing whole school change and ‘leading learning in schools and networks’. Centre of Excellence has created a network of regional centres and is working with other national teacher training organisations to implement an in-service teacher training programme across Kazakhstan. The programme is expected to reach 120000 teachers over five years (CIE, 2013:8).

^{iv} According to data provided by National Statistical agency of the RK, in 2014 there were 294 897 teachers, with 58312 (19.8%) male teachers and 236585 (80.2%) female.

^v The headquarter of Orleu – “The Republican Institute for the Development of Leading and Research-Pedagogical Staff of the Education System of the Republic of Kazakhstan” is located in Astana with an additional 17 regional branches/institutes in major cities across the country; http://orleu-edu.kz/RegionalOffices_eng, accessed 6 July 2015.

^{vi} Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education programmes:

<http://gse.nu.edu.kz/gse/MAIN/Programms/SchoolLeadership>

^{vii} Another professional development opportunity for a relatively small number of school leaders and teachers in Kazakhstan is offered by the Centre for International Development Programme – the Boloshak (in Kaz. ‘future’). Source: OECD (2014), *Reviews of National Policies for Education. Secondary Education in Kazakhstan*. p. 177.

^{viii} <http://www.nis.edu.kz/en/news/?id=2888>, accessed 28 July 2015.

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